DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 854 PS 010 672

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TITLE Day Care as a Family Support Service: Household Decision-Making and Implications for Policy.
PUB DATE 18 Feb 79
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the American Home Economics Association (1st, February 18, 1979)
AVAILABLE FROM John C. Moore, Jr., 2030 Golf Course Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091 ($1.50)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care Services; Decision Making; Early Childhood Education; *Family Characteristics; Federal Government; *Federal Programs; Federal Regulation; Government Role; *Policy Formation; *Public Policy

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses public policy implications of viewing day care as a support service to families. The paper begins with a presentation of various rationales to justify government involvement in day care services, several possible roles to be played by government (direct subsidy, delivery of services, regulation), and a generalized government perspective that unites a broad range of services and policy arenas. It is observed that if government involvement in day care is intended to provide support service to families, it is necessary first to examine how families make day care decisions. The second section of the paper presents the factors that may influence family decisions regarding use of day care. This discussion, which includes a mixture of hypotheses and research findings, is described as a tentative formulation. Policy implications are presented in the third section. The implications are based on two assumptions: (1) that enhancing family functioning is the dominant rationale for government involvement, and (2) that the second section is a reasonable portrayal of day care decision making. It is argued that parental ability to choose among types of day care and specific facilities should be as unfettered as possible. (Author/RH)

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DAY CARE AS A FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICE: HOUSEHOLD DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

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February 18, 1979

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PS 010672

Paper presented at the 1st Eastern Regional Meeting of the American Home Economics Association. I would like to acknowledge the very helpful comments provided on an earlier draft by Gwen Morgan of Wheelock College and by Barbara Warden, Public Affairs Director of AHEA.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two years, invoking "the family" has become increasingly popular as the orientation for designing and delivering services. Unfortunately, it too often never gets beyond rhetoric. In this paper, I will discuss some of the implications for public policy when day care is viewed as a support service to families.

To provide a context for this discussion, let's begin by constructing a rudimentary policy framework, consisting of rationale, role, and perspective.

There are many rationales to justify government involvement in day care services. These may be grouped into the following five categories:

1. private-sector breakdown--the free market does not function efficiently or equitably, since there are social benefits not reflected in the private transactions and since parents may not be able to protect their own interests when consuming day care services;
2. adult-oriented--day care relates to labor force participation and to public welfare; day care is a respite from child-rearing which is especially important for parents of handicapped children;
3. child-oriented--day care is a service through which child development can be enhanced by carefully planned programs of activities, meals, and support services; and
4. family-oriented--day care is a service to support the family unit, as distinct from supporting particular members in the family.
5. community-oriented--day care is the vehicle through which other services may be delivered and can be used as the structure for community organization efforts.

There are several alternatives for the actual role to be played by government. The actual role that government assumes is strongly influenced by which of the above rationales predominates. Government role can be subdivided into three categories of action:

1. direct subsidy of services--tax deductions or credits, cash grants to families, vouchers (in place of cash), and direct payments to providers;

2. delivery of services--development of systems for service provision and provision of support for day care (e.g., information and referral, provider training, provider associations); and
3. regulation-setting standards, developing and enforcing licensing laws, providing technical assistance to aid providers in meeting the regulatory requirements.

In addition to rationale and role, the third component to this policy framework is government "perspective."* Any one of the above rationales could be viewed as a perspective that cuts across an extremely broad range of services and policy arenas. The rationale of day care as a family support service, for example, could be generalized into a broader governmental commitment to enhance effective family functioning through promotion the integrity and capability of families. Effective family functioning, as perspective, cuts across such diverse areas as housing, social and human services, tax policy, defense, and employment.

While the politics may differ considerably between rationale and perspective, the distinction is not critical for this discussion. The policy implications to be addressed in this paper are the same whether the orientation toward family support appears as rationale or perspective.

For the purpose of discussion in this paper, I will assume that the predominating rationale (or perspective) for government involvement in day care is as a support service to families. If this rationale is to predominate, it is necessary first to examine how families make day care decisions.

The second section of this paper presents the factors that may influence the decisions families make regarding use of day care. This discussion includes a mixture of hypotheses and research findings. As a result, the discussion should only be viewed as a tentative layout of the relationships involved. In this section, distinction is made between the amount of care used and the type of care chosen. The influences discussed include household structural characteristics, price and income factors, supply characteristics and attitudes.

Policy implications are presented in the third section. The implications are based on two assumptions: (1) that enhancing family functioning is the dominant rationale, and (2) that the second section is a reasonable portrayal of day care decision making. The case being presented in the third section is that, given the above two assumptions, parental ability to choose among types of day care and specific facilities should be as unfettered as possible.

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*I first became aware of this concept in a recent book by Kammerman and Kahn (1978). The concept of evaluating the family impact of all major legislation is consistent with family functioning as perspective.

DAY CARE DECISIONS

While one could identify many different day care-related decisions, I will address only the two most fundamental ones: the amount of care used and the type of care chosen.* It is important to look at use of day care from both these perspectives, since the factors related to each decision are quite different. Both decisions have economic significance, but each in a different way.

Before discussing each set of factors, let me first say that, unlike choosing a type of care, the amount of care used is often not a proactive decision, but rather, primarily a function of the number of hours that parents need care in order to pursue various out-of-home activities. I should add that, to some extent, the number of hours of care is probably moderated by a parent's feelings about the appropriateness of using care for very young children or for older children who are ready to be on their own.

In defining what is meant by "day care," the perspective of this paper is from that of parents, rather than providers or social service professionals. For parents, a broad definition of day care should be used, without limits as to the reason why care is used or the motivations of the caregiver. Four classes of day care arrangements could thus be encompassed in the broadest possible definition of day care:

1. care by other than a parent within the immediate family;
2. home arrangements by relative or unrelated person, either in the child's or caregiver's home;
3. group care arrangements, including centers, preschools, and parent cooperatives; and
4. public and private schools.

In considering the decisions as to amount used and type chosen, emphasis will be placed on the second and third groups in this list. While there are some important family policy issues involving care provided within the immediate family, most day care issues (standards, subsidies, etc.) do not

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*While many families use a mixture of types, we will assume that each household uses only one type, in order to simplify the discussion.

extend into the nuclear family. Use of schools for day care is excluded, largely due to the fact that school attendance is required by law, regardless of parent preferences. While parents definitely plan for (look forward to?) the reduced child care responsibilities when their children begin school, this option will not be considered further due to the lack of parent choice involved.

Hours of Care Used

The amount of care used by a family relates most directly to decisions as to how the household's time is allocated among leisure activities, market production, and non-market production. Perhaps the variable most strongly related to amount of care used is the number of hours that the parent* is away from home for work, school, special activities, etc. Several circumstances may indirectly relate to hours of care used, through influencing the number of hours that the parent is away from home:

1. marital status and presence of other adults in the household are direct measures of the total supply of adult time resources in the family;
2. a working parent's wage strongly affects (positively) the number of hours worked;
3. other household income tends to reduce the number of hours away (this happens most frequently in middle- and upper-income families with two parents);
4. the number of children is an indicator of the total demand for household production (Walker and Woods, 1976), thus reducing the number of hours away from home; and
5. education is closely related to opportunities for high-quality jobs, but also related (positively) to time spent with young children.**

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*Throughout this discussion, "the parent" refers to the adult in a household that is most responsible for the household's children.

**Studies have shown that well-educated women more often leave the labor force when their children are of preschool age (Leibowitz, 1974, Hill and Stafford, 1973). This is consistent with the theoretically greater interest in human capital investment among better educated parents. There might be a counter-trend among parents who can afford not to work, in which the better educated parents might use more hours of care to go out (such as shopping or socially) or for child development reasons.

Several household structural characteristics could be expected to affect the number of hours of care used. Collectively, they represent either demand for household production or supply of within-family caregivers. In addition to the above list, some other characteristics might be:

1. age of children, in which the youngest child might set an upper bound to the number of hours used;
2. presence of a handicapped child that needs special attention;
3. presence of older siblings who can care for younger children, particularly when the children are teenagers caring for elementary school siblings; and
4. an unemployed spouse of a working parent would represent a within-family caregiver, thus reducing the number of child care hours used beyond the immediate family.

Type of Care Chosen

To understand what family conditions are closely associated with amount and type of care used, it is important to recognize the influence of day care supply on parent choices. Ideally, research should assess supply and demand at the same time (see Hill, 1977, for a discussion of this). The influence of supply is probably more pertinent to choice of care than total number of hours used. When considering home versus group arrangements and when making distinctions between centers and nursery schools, the following supply characteristics are likely to influence parent choices:

1. age of children--centers and especially preschools are oriented toward caring only for preschoolers;
2. number of hours needed--group programs are oriented toward children needing half- or full-time care; and
3. reason and schedule for using care--homes are more likely to be used for casual or irregular schedules of care, since centers and nursery schools tend to be less flexible in schedule.

If one were to consider only families having at least one preschooler and using a relatively large number of hours of care per week, most of the influence of supply characteristics should be controlled for. It is among these families that the remaining discussion is directed.

The role of price and income factors is probably more strongly felt in decisions on type, as compared to amount. The unit cost of different types of care varies considerably; homes are much more likely to offer care at no charge (Unco, 1976). Also, who earns how much of the family's income is likely to affect choice of care. Since parents tend to spend about one-fifth of their income on work-related child care (Shortlidge and Brito, 1977), those with higher earning potential are more likely to use housekeepers, centers and nursery schools. Wage is also an indicator of the worker's "time cost;" high wage-earners are more likely to use whatever care requires the least amounts of their time to arrange and maintain (Lave and Angrist, 1975). Households with high incomes or households in which one parent earns most of the income are more likely to use care for reasons other than work, and therefore one would expect relatively low use of day care centers.

In considering type of care used, marital status is likely to have a strong influence, but interpreting any connection would be difficult due to its relationship to such other factors as household income, hours away from home, and the likelihood of other (nonspouse) adults in the family.

Finally, attitudes will affect types of care chosen.* This has already been somewhat controlled for, since this discussion is directed to households with preschoolers. (Many parents feel that child care is inappropriate for very young children and for older school-age children.) Another variable relevant to type of care used is the parent's level of formal education, since highly educated parents may use care for different reasons and schedules than less educated parents.

The final family characteristic to be considered is racial or ethnic background. Survey data (Unco, 1976) has shown a definite relationship between race/ethnicity and preference for types of care. When contrasting centers and homes, it was found that Blacks preferred centers and Whites preferred Nursery Schools. It was also found that Hispanics preferred home arrangements over either centers or nursery schools.

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*For a discussion of emotional and psychological factors associated with day care decision-making, see Suelzle, Gans, and Katz (1977).

Race and ethnicity are highly correlated with many economic characteristics of families (Ross and Sawhill, 1975). If these were controlled, it is doubtful whether the above relationships would still be evident. The Unco survey data revealed a much greater likelihood that Blacks (as compared to Whites) will use related (versus unrelated) caregivers. However, this may be due to the difference in costs or availability of relatives, rather than a direct attitudinal difference between groups.

In the public policy arena, the connection between minority group membership and child care is extremely important. The implications for policy are considerably different depending on whether the apparent connection is due to differences in economics or attitudinal preferences. Indeed, it has been argued that the connection may really be due to the bias of government bureaucracies, social welfare professionals, and early childhood educators in favor of a delivery system stratified along social class lines (Greenblatt, 1978).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps the most important implication of the above discussion for public policy has to do with delegating decisions to parents. It would seem that for day care to effectively support family functioning, day care decisions--as to when, where, how much and why day care is to be used--should be made by parents, not by professionals or bureaucrats. If all the above factors are legitimately related to day care decisions, it would seem next to impossible that any outsider could consistently make better decisions than parents, in terms of benefits or supports for the families involved (Keniston, 1977).

More specifically, what would this suggest for government policies regarding subsidizing care, delivering services, and regulating providers and facilities?

In terms of subsidizing services, the mechanism chosen should be direct to parents rather than to providers, thus giving parents more effective control over who cares for their children and how the care is to be provided. Unsubsidized users of day care presently have the power

to discontinue unsatisfactory care through their control over payments. The fact that a family is eligible for subsidy does not mean that it should forego the power to "exit" through control over payments. If family functioning is the rationale for government involvement, it would follow that families should maintain control over purchasing of their day care services.

Regarding the delivery of services, the government should maintain a policy of diversity and encouragement of informed choice among types. Power over purchasing is not sufficient if parents do not have the ability to make appropriate choices or if there isn't sufficient diversity from which to choose. Of particular note is the traditional disregard by professionals and government officials for home care arrangements.

The final implication involves regulation of care. The rationale of day care as a family support service and the complexity of factors influencing parent preferences suggest that the amount of regulation be carefully limited to avoid unnecessarily restricting parental freedom to choose among types of care and specific providers or facilities within any given type. This concern for regulation is especially important for the alternatives among home arrangements. Day care in homes should be viewed as much more fragile than care in centers. Furthermore, government's ability to regulate homes is much more questionable as compared to center arrangements. The worst situation, of course, is to have excessive regulations that do not protect children while at the same time limit parent choice.

These implications might not be well received by child advocates or representatives of day care providers. For child advocates, the presumption is often that increased parent choice will lead to increased risk that children will be cared for in harmful settings. Advocates, however, often overlook the risks associated with overregulated day care, in which it becomes harder for parents to arrange day care that truly fits their individual family's needs. For day care providers, increasing parent control might be threatening to their own autonomy. This is particularly true for group care situations, in which providers have a greater need to maintain control over the situation both to preserve their more professionalized

image and to simplify the administrative problems that might come with increased parent control.

As compared to many advocates, professionals, and government officials, my preference is clearly in the direction of less regulation and more freedom of choice available for parents. However, I would hope that these personal preferences do not interfere with the principal message being presented in this discussion of implications: namely, that it is inconsistent for an individual to advocate for day care as a family support service and, at the same time to advocate for policies that would substantially limit parent choice.

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